

Fort William

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The rugged men of the fur trade trail-blazed this nation, pushing deep into vast, uncharted wilderness, harbingers of a new life in an old land. Seekers after rich pelts, they created the foundation on which Canada is built.



Trading in furs during the early 19th century was big business and the North West Company, despite intense and sometimes violent competition with others, had gained the lion's share of the trade. American independence and the imposition of customs duties forced the abandonment of the Company's original supply base at Grand Portage.

In 1803 a new fort on British soil became the wilderness headquarters for the Company's operations which were pushed to the Pacific and Arctic Oceans.

Located at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River on Lake Superior's shore, Fort William was built by the Company's partners as a depot to exchange trade goods from Montreal for furs from the western reaches of the continent.



Through three seasons, Fort William knew tranquility. Its peaceful existence was shattered each summer by the "Great Rendezvous"—the annual meeting of the North West Company.

In from the Western posts came the Northmen with their *canots du nord* laden with packs of rich furs. They lived in a harsh and unforgiving land and considered themselves elite voyageurs. They looked with considerable scorn on the Montreal-based voyageurs, "the pork-eaters," who travelled a mere 1000 miles in their 36 foot *canots de maître*.

"These Nor'Westers were hardy, courageous, shrewd, and proud. They spent a good part of their lives travelling incredible distances in their birch-bark canoes, shooting rapids, or navigating inland seas. They were wrecked and drowned. They suffered hunger and starvation. They fell victims of smallpox, syphilis, and ruin. Yet they conquered half of a continent, and they built up a commercial empire, the like of which North America at least has never seen."

W. S. Wallace.



Temporary voyageur and Indian camps sprang up outside the palisades of Fort William as the travel weary voyageurs soon plunged into a wild round of games and celebrations.

In the Council House, the wintering partners and agents from Montreal met to appraise the furs, settle the accounts of the previous season, and organize policies for the coming year.



Business affairs were completed; bales of furs were sorted and packed for the return trip to Montreal; fuzzy heads were cleared; canoes were made ready and the exodus began, as the employees who had found a temporary home at Fort William departed for destinations east and west.

Today you can be a part of the brawny era of the fur trade as the Great Rendezvous is recreated some 9 miles from its original site, on the heavily wooded banks of the Kaministiquia River—the old voyageur route to the west.



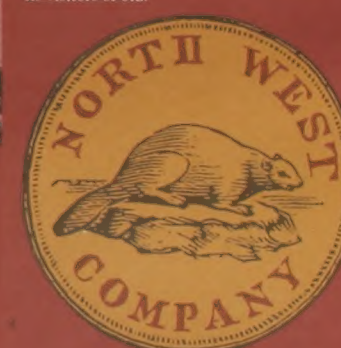
Fort William has been reconstructed by the Ontario Government as it was between 1816 and 1821. The Fort is the largest fur trade reconstruction in North America and is operated with advice from a committee of local residents.

Fort William was people, and you will experience how they created a fur trade society—a blend of native and European cultures and how native skills and ingenuity were adapted by French Canadians and moulded by shrewd and determined traders and explorers, mostly Scots, into a flourishing business.

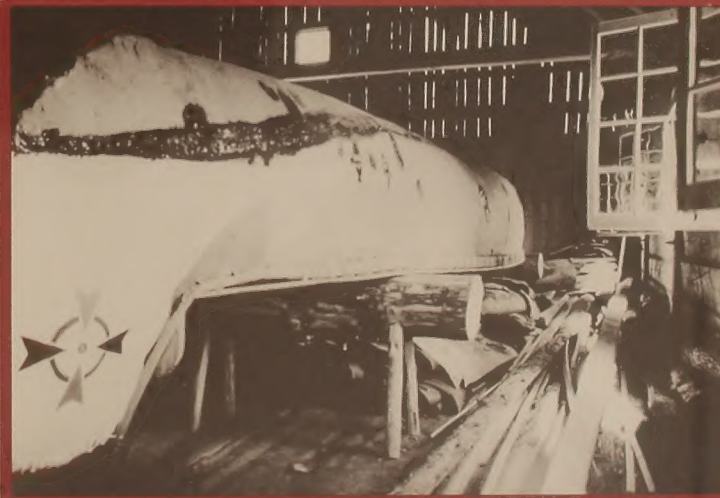
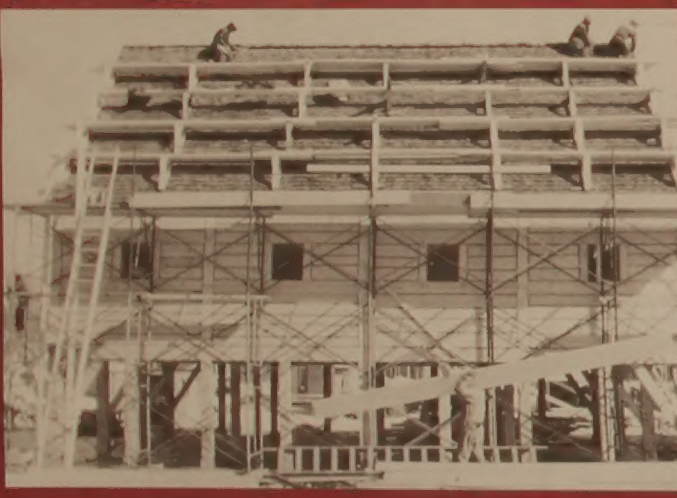
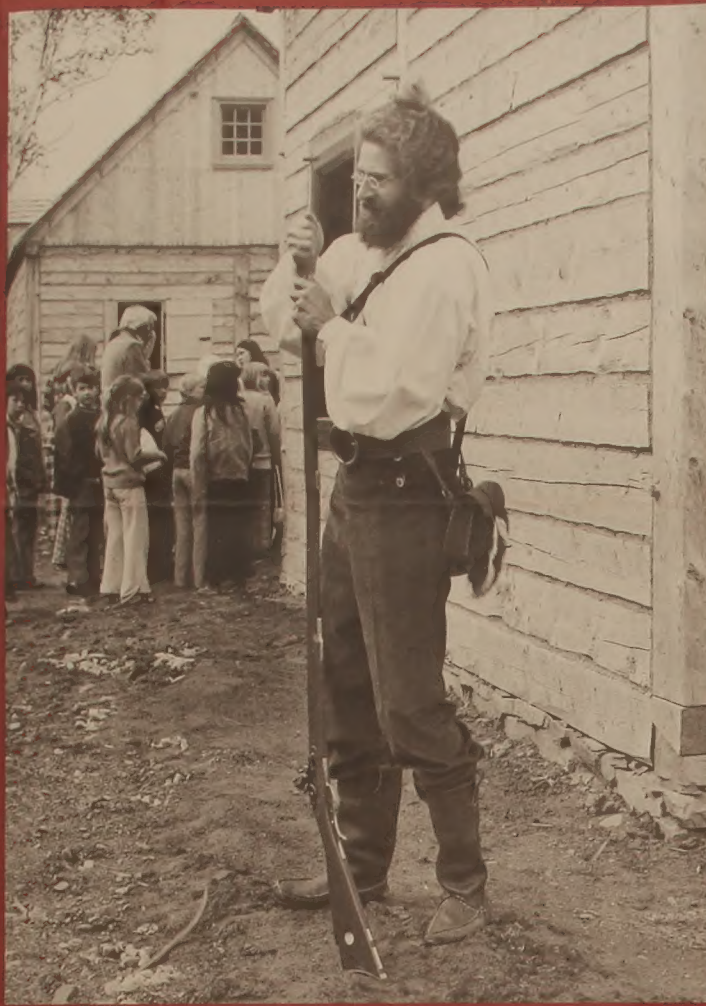
Witness the hustle and bustle as canoes are readied for the return voyage. Help construct a huge birchbark canoe. Catch the snatches of song that drift on a breeze from the voyageurs' encampment. Start to the bark of a trade musket being tested by the gunsmith. Enjoy the pungent aroma and activity of the farm or the rasp of a bow on strings as a fiddler warms up to a reel. Taste bread fresh from a brick oven or dig into a hearty stew. Hear the wail of the pipes intermingling with the clink of the blacksmith's hammer.

Experience Fort William with the men and women who are working to make history live again.

The Fort is isolated from the hectic pulse of our modern age. As you move through the wooded glen, or approach the wharf by canoe as the voyageurs did, the 20th century drops away and Fort William greets you as it greeted its visitors of old.



Fort William



1 Watercolour of Fort William painted by Lieutenant Irvine in 1811. The painting remains the best illustration of Fort William in the days of the North West Company. Public Archives of Canada.
 2 It took all summer to travel the 3,000 mile long fur trade route from Montreal to the Athabasca country.
 3 Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser and David Thompson in their search for fur and a trade route to the Pacific Ocean, explored and discovered most of present day Canada. Portrait of Simon Fraser.
 4 The North West Company Coat of Arms.
 5 Voyageurs shooting the rapids in a *canot de maitre*. Before the railways came the fur trade canoe was the primary means of transporting freight, mail and passengers to western Canada.
 6 Trade goods packaged in 90 pound bales made ready for the 36 foot *canot de maitre*. With an average crew of 8 to 10 men these giant birchbark canoes could carry a payload of three tons—four tons gross weight. H. A. Ogden, Public Archives of Canada.

7 To the voyageurs the *Rendezvous* was a time to rest, eat good food, enjoy drinking with old friends and singing and dancing to the fiddler's music.
 8 North West Company Beaver Token. Today only seven specimens of the Company's Beaver Coinage are known to exist.
 9 In the shadow of Mount McKay, Fort William nestles in twentieth century isolation on Pointe de Meuron.
 10 Reconstruction work in progress on the North West House, the summer quarters for the Company partners.
 11 It took several hundred men over three summers to build Fort William. Today's reconstruction was completed in a similar time span by two hundred dedicated craftsmen working year round.
 12 Fort William gunsmith.
 13 Nails, hinges, hooks, latches and horseshoes are handmade by the blacksmith.
 14 Landing a *canot de maitre* in 'The Great Rendezvous' pageant at Fort William.
 15 Daily bread-making at Boucher's Quebec-style bake oven.

16 A "Montreal Canoe" on horses, awaiting minor repairs.
 17 The living room in Mr. Taitt's House. Mr. Taitt was the clerk responsible for the operation and management of the Fort.
 18 A voyageur en route to Fort William. "...fairly regularly, a stop was made for a few minutes each hour to allow the men to have a pipe. This event was so important that distances came to be measured in pipes; trois pipes might be 15 to 20 miles depending on wind and current."
 19 Site plan illustration. Fort William was one of the first company towns in Canada.

